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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 001558

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: TOUR D'HORIZON WITH SENIOR ADVISOR  
BEREKET

REF: ADDIS ABABA 1483

Classified By: DCM Janet Wilgus for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Prime Minister Meles' public relations and political advisor Bereket Simon engaged in a relaxed tour d'horizon with Charge May 30. Bereket told the Charge that the GOE was focusing on economic development in the Somali region and winning the support of the local population in a military campaign against the ONLF. He said that political dialogue with leaders from the UEDF and OFDM would soon turn to revision of controversial rules of Parliamentary procedure, and claimed that dialogue would soon begin with parliamentarians from the reorganized CUDP. He also discussed confrontations in the Oromiya region. Bereket indicated that most regions would likely hold (delayed) local elections in May 2007; he stated that the GOE was interested in inviting Afrobarometer, a respected regional polling organization, to conduct surveys in Ethiopia. Concerning the ongoing trial of CUD leaders, Bereket said that the GOE prosecution was trying to move quickly in presenting evidence, but that judges were independent and decided, with input from the defendants, how rapidly the proceedings could move. Charge replied that the GOE's treason case so far appeared weak and urged bail or parole for at least some defendants. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Charge, accompanied by Pol/Econ Counselor, met May 30 with EPRDF spokesman and Meles advisor Bereket Simon to discuss a range of political issues. The former Minister of Information serves now as a public relations advisor with the Minister. Among his duties is to represent the ruling party in its ongoing dialogues with opposition parties.

SOMALI REGION: DESPERATE ONLF RESPONSIBLE FOR BOMBINGS  
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13. (C) Bereket blamed recent bombings in Jijiga, capital of Ethiopia's Somali Region, on the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), which he claimed received support from the Eritrean Government. He told the Charge that the bombings reflect the current desperation of the ONLF, which is being squeezed by more intensive political and development efforts by the GOE in the Somali region, as well as the GOE's current military campaign against the insurgents. Bereket alluded to the difficult situation the GOE faced in the area, with some local government officials failing to do their jobs well, while the ONLF continued attacking humanitarian relief convoys to drought-stricken regions. He explained that the GOE had decided to take decisive military steps to get the ONLF under control and to make room for constructive politics. Bereket claimed that the swathe of territory

controlled by the ONLF was shrinking steadily, and that the local population had been helpful of late in combating both the ONLF and Al-Itihad (AIAI). He argued that while the ONLF was more active and aggressive than AIAI, that organization and the ONLF worked in similar ways, including the infiltration of traditional, moderate religious institutions.

¶4. (C) The Charge reminded Bereket that the USG had pulled back most of CJTF-HOA's civil affairs teams in response to the latest GOE offensive against the ONLF. She said the teams were eager to get back to work as soon as it was possible to do so. She also recalled recent conversations with ENDF Chief of Staff General Samora in which the latter had revived old complaints about how CJTF-HOA operated in an uncoordinated fashion in the Somali region. Bereket replied that the U.S.-Ethiopian relationship was growing by the day, and that such issues could surely be worked out. The Charge reiterated that the USG wanted not only to enhance its own image in the Ogaden region, but to help the GOE improve its image as well through better addressing the needs of communities. Progress in this direction would reduce the space available for the ONLF.

CUDP TO JOIN POLITICAL DIALOGUES; RULES OF PARLIAMENT NEXT  
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¶5. (C) Bereket volunteered that the GOE planned on starting a dialogue with the re-established Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP) soon. He praised their statement distancing themselves from the recently-formed Alliance for Freedom and Democracy (AFD), a collection of Diaspora-based opposition movements (septel). Bereket, the ruling party's spokesman, added that the EPRDF had "learned a lot from this election. Why go for 100 percent all the time?" He said

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that the CUDP's public statement had satisfied the EPRDF's basic criteria in demonstrating that the CUDP was committed to the constitution and to the peaceful democratic process.

¶6. (C) Concerning ongoing political dialogues themselves, Bereket indicated that the next phase of talks would focus on revisions to the Parliamentary rules of procedure. He reiterated that the GOE found the comparative studies funded by donors very useful and constructive, and planned to implement many recommendations regardless of what opposition parties said. Nonetheless, he hoped that the EPRDF and opposition parties could reach consensus using the comparative studies as a basis.

¶7. (C) Bereket said the ruling party wished that it could engage in a single dialogue with all opposition parties so as to reach a single agreement on upcoming issues, like the rules of procedure as well as the media and the National Electoral Board (NEB). It was unfortunate, he added, that opposition leaders were in some cases focused on issues of status, each wanting to take the lead in negotiations with the EPRDF. He noted that UEDF Chairman Beyene Petros remained reluctant to join with the CUDP in a common dialogue. Bereket asked the Charge to speak with party leaders about unifying the distinct dialogues -- one of which had also begun with UEDP-Medhin leader Lidetu Ayalew -- so facilitate more rapid progress. The Charge agreed to take the matter up with opposition leaders.

¶8. (C) The Charge raised the issue of political funding, including potential capacity-building assistance from donors to parties. She underscored the parties' need to re-establish offices, since some, like the CUDP and Merera Gudina's Oromo National Congress, had not been able to use their offices since November. Bereket pointed out the direct foreign contributions to political parties were illegal under the Constitution, but said there were ways to channel assistance legally, such as through the NEB. He recommended training and office equipment over cash. The Charge emphasized the potential benefits of providing state funding

for political parties as a way to limit the influence of the Diaspora in domestic politics.

#### LOCAL ELECTIONS LIKELY IN MAY 2007; POLLING WELCOME

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¶9. (C) Bereket said that the EPRDF was thinking in terms of scheduling local elections in most regions for May 2007. He also mentioned a recent Afrobarometer poll conducted in a range of African countries. The results had shown that citizens were disappointed and frustrated by democracy in many places because it had not effectively addressed their basic concerns. He also said the results demonstrated that there was no "cookie-cutter approach" to economic reform; countries had to adapt successful policies from other places to their own local realities. Bereket added that the EPRDF was very comfortable with the work that Afrobarometer did and was open to the inclusion of Ethiopia in the firm's periodic surveys, which currently covered around 20 African countries.

(Comment: Post also met with Afrobarometer during the firm's recent visit to Addis Ababa and intends to work with other donors to support the establishment of sound, reliable political polling in Ethiopia.)

#### MANAGING CONFLICT IN OROMIYA

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¶10. (C) The Charge briefed Bereket on her recent trip to Ambo in Oromiya region (reftel). She noted the tensions that had been created by the fact that local officials continued to be appointed by the EPRDF despite the ONC's resounding victory around Ambo. Bereket replied that the EPRDF had lost in Ambo but had won a clear majority at the regional level, giving the ruling party the right to appoint all zone-level officials. He noted that different regions had different constitutional provisions in this regard due to differing ethnic compositions and political realities.

¶11. (C) The Charge raised the case of 6 Oromiya regional MPs elected by the ONC who had been imprisoned in connection with violent protests. Bereket countered that the GOE had evidence that some of the ONC MPs had visited Eritrea, had used Eritrean media for propaganda and were suspected of participation in a terrorist network. The Charge pointed out that GOE prosecutors had apparently gone "judicial shopping" with these cases, taking them to a new judge when a previous

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judge dismissed the charges.

¶12. (C) When pressed by Pol/Econ Counselor on the courts' removal of legal recognition from Merera Gudina's ONC party, Bereket replied that the EPRDF continued to deal constructively with Merera in Parliament as the head of the "largest faction" of the ONC. Nonetheless, he said, it was up to the ONC's disparate factions, not the GOE, to solve the party's current legal troubles.

#### TRIAL: CHARGE POINTS TO WEAK CASE SO FAR, NEED FOR PAROLE

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¶13. (C) Pol/Econ Counselor asked Bereket about prospects for concluding rapidly the ongoing trial of CUD leaders, including Chairman Hailu Shawel. The EPRDF spokesman claimed that GOE prosecutors had indeed been trying to move more quickly through the state's evidence, but that judges and defendants had insisted on moving more slowly in some cases. When asked about the potential for a three-month recess during Ethiopia's rainy season, as per the usual judicial calendar, Bereket suggested that perhaps the GOE would pay judges and prosecutors supplemental wages to continue the trial through the usual recess period.

¶14. (C) The Charge reiterated her appeal for humanitarian parole for individual defendants, such as a pregnant woman in the group. She also again suggested reducing charges to

allow for bail for the broader group. The Charge and Pol/Econ Counselor both argued that international observers had so far been unimpressed with the GOE's evidence of a violent conspiracy organized by the defendants. Bereket took the remarks on board but offered no substantive reply. The Charge asked for continued, periodic access to CUD detainees for herself and other key ambassadors, including the Ambassadors' Donors Group Chair, French Ambassador Gompertz, as well as EU Ambassador Clarke. Bereket agreed to facilitate such access.

HUDDLESTON